

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

THE COACHING COMMITMENT

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“Commitment—the capacity to act and follow-through on a result worth creating—is key to all success. Commitment means choosing. It means taking action to support your choices...People don’t quit or fail because they lack ideas or talent. They fail or quit because they lack a tried-and-true structure—a framework—that energizes and organizes their choices and actions.”

--Kenneth H. Blanchard (from Bruce Elkins’ website, Success Coaching for Commitment and Results)

With this being NFL Championship Sunday, it seems only fitting that we once again consider the added value of coaching. Not so much because of the exceptional success this year’s “Final Four” coaches (Bill Belichick, Andy Reid, Sean Payton, and Sean McVay) have achieved—with their combined 49 Wins against only 15 Losses. But rather, because coaching, in general, remains such a popular endeavor, and not merely in sports: today companies make common use of executive coaches; there are personal “life” coaches; and spiritual coaches; not to mention, personal trainers—another kind of coach who will even come to your home to devise and oversee a customized fitness regimen right for you.

If you step back and ask yourself, “What do all of these coaching endeavors share in common?” you begin to appreciate even more the added value good coaching can bring—to anyone and any organization. In this regard, we’ve always gone back to the derivation of today’s concept of coaching, to the “original” dictionary definition that goes something like this: *Transporting a group of people to some place they could not easily reach on their own.* You can imagine such a definition referring originally to something like a “coach and six horses” in merry olde England, or better yet, a “stagecoach” from the old American West. The implications of such a definition are pretty clear: effective coaching helps groups of individuals reach their common goals while simultaneously becoming a unit, a team. Said another way, good coaching fosters both *productivity* and *motivation*.

You rarely meet anyone, especially in business circles, who does not readily agree with the value of coaching a team. After all, many business people have belonged to sports teams in their school days and may coach their own children’s teams nowadays. But even those of us who have never participated on a formal athletic team probably have a team or two in some sport that we follow avidly. So, day-in and day-out, most of us have a notion of what distinguishes the really effective coach from the not-so-effective one. In

fact, in most organizations, regardless of industry, we commonly hear of experienced Sales Managers “coaching” their Sales Reps, their District Team. Why is it, though, that we rarely hear of anyone in Marketing actively “coaching their teams?” Or perhaps a better question is this: “Why is it that a certain, very few marketing organizations—like a Procter & Gamble, a Unilever, or a Nestle—have a reputation for productive coaching, but most others do not?”

We think the answer has to do with **commitment**—more specifically, a **commitment to coaching**. Some organizations have it; others don’t. Picking up on the introductory quote, some organizations have *chosen* to instill the “tried-and-true structure, the framework” of coaching into their daily business, and others have not. And, given that nearly everyone acknowledges the value of coaching a team, the only explanation that makes sense as to why some have chosen to coach and others have not is this: *coaching organizations have seen the results of their coaching—in increased productivity and in stronger motivation*. To get a little more specific, we think that coaching organizations in Marketing adhere to four key principles:

- 1. Coaching adds value (or it isn’t coaching).** Coaching is **not** the act of telling people what they did wrong; that’s called evaluating. Honestly, not many people—children, students, business people—tend to appreciate being told what they did wrong. Nor are they very often motivated by that. What they **do** appreciate, especially from someone whose know-how and experiences they respect, is practical help on *how to do something better*—more technically sound; more strategic or creative; more efficiently; more consistently. As we often remind our clients, coaching is all about *add-valuating*, not *e-valuating*.
- 2. Really effective coaching works simultaneously on 2 levels—functional and emotional.** We once had a client who, when providing direction to their outside agencies and suppliers, made a distinction between *commenting* (giving directive actions) and *team-building* (“bucking them up” to feel good about their tasks). This client believed that these two should normally be done sequentially: first you give your task-related comments; then you finish with an “ata-boy.” While we could not agree more with the notion that effective coaching requires both the giving of value-added, functional direction and the emotional exhortation to “keep charging the hill,” these are best done simultaneously. In other words, experienced marketing coaches have the skill-sets to provide practical strategic and creative direction in a highly motivating way—regardless of whether the overall thrust is “I’m very pleased with the work you’ve done,” or is “We need to start over here.” It’s the deft combination of these two that really drives *team productivity*.
- 3. Coaching is on-going, with daily practice and reinforcement.** Like any skill, good coaching demands practice, practice, practice to achieve it and to hold onto it. Those organizations with a coaching commitment do not limit their coaching to

those few times when an outside agency comes to call. Instead, they train their marketers on their particular coaching “framework” and they make use of that very framework day-in and day-out. For example, when a senior manager reviews some work a brand team has prepared, she or he employs coaching principles in responding to that work (to add value and to motivate the team to take their work to the next level); in addition, when a team presents work and receives direction from, say, the Assistant Brand Manager, following the meeting that person’s Brand Manager will right away take time to “debrief” how effective the Assistant’s coaching was and to offer practical suggestions for providing even more productive direction the next time.

4. Finally—and most important of all—“You Can’t Coach What You Can’t Assess.”

These organizations known for their consistent coaching acumen are, first and foremost, also known for their ability to *teach and instill in* marketers all the core disciplines that they need to succeed. To add real value to any Innovation Development Process, to any Brand Positioning Strategy Creation, to any Insight Exploration and Hypothesis Generation, or to any Communication Strategy and Campaign Idea Development, you simply have to know how to do all of these things at a high level yourself.

It’s kind of funny that we hear organizations again and again talking about and working to achieve a level of shared *marketing excellence*. But when you dive into the specifics of what consistent actions or skill-sets marketing excellence comprises, you almost never see *adhering to a value-added coaching framework*. It’s an often overlooked, probably under-appreciated, best practice. Maybe it’s time to push for a *Commitment to Coaching Excellence*.

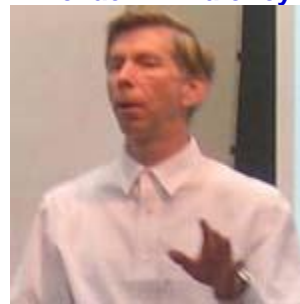
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